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Jacqueline Bennett

SUNY – Oneonta, bennetjs@oneonta.edu

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Abstract

Excerpt: If you are new to the scholarship of teaching and learning and want to get a solid foundation on how to make your courses more effective learning experiences, this book is an excellent choice. *Teaching at Its Best* is aimed directly at faculty to use for themselves, rather than for faculty developers or administrators. The content is a combination of “how to...” suggestions that will improve general teaching effectiveness as well as “what is...” sections that discuss different learning theories and methods. Active-learning

Keywords

Linda B. Nilson, Teaching effectiveness

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Book Review

***Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*, 2nd ed.**
Linda B. Nilson (Anker, 2003)

Review by

Jacqueline Bennett
SUNY College at Oneonta
Oneonta, New York, USA
bennetjs@oneonta.edu

If you are new to the scholarship of teaching and learning and want to get a solid foundation on how to make your courses more effective learning experiences, this book is an excellent choice. *Teaching at Its Best* is aimed directly at faculty to use for themselves, rather than for faculty developers or administrators. The content is a combination of “how to...” suggestions that will improve general teaching effectiveness as well as “what is...” sections that discuss different learning theories and methods. Active-learning techniques, such as discovery-based and problem-based learning, are clearly explained and situations presented for which these strategies are appropriate. While the book will not answer all of your questions, nor is it designed to, most chapters include appropriate recommendations for further reading if more depth is desired. Hundreds of references are used throughout the book to provide ample support for the various topics and are collected in an extensive references section at the end of the book. The book is written in a casual style with most educational jargon avoided or clearly defined when used out of necessity, thus making the text accessible by faculty in a broad variety of disciplines. This book would be used best as an introduction to SoTL and a source of ideas and techniques.

The book is divided into five general themes presented in a roughly chronological order that parallels the unfolding of a course: Part I – Sound Preparations; Part II – Good Beginnings; Part III – Varieties of Teaching and Learning Strategies; Part IV – Teaching Problem Solving for Today’s World; and Part V – Assessment/Measuring Outcomes. Part I contains many helpful suggestions for getting a course ready. While some of the suggestions may seem to be common sense, there are others that faculty might overlook. For example, the first chapter encourages faculty to become familiar with support services on their campus ranging from the obvious (colleagues and faculty development centers) to the less obvious but still useful (multicultural, disabilities, and counseling centers). Included are reasons that these different services could support or enhance one’s teaching. Part I then proceeds to provide insight into understanding students and how they learn, designing courses around objectives and a cognitive hierarchy of objectives, syllabus creation, and an extremely understandable treatment of copyright law that avoids lawyer-speak.

Part II largely deals with setting the tone of a course and establishing policies. Notable topics in this section are dealing with classroom incivility, academic dishonesty, and student motivation. Part III gets into the real meat of this book where different learning styles (e.g., Kolb, Mill, Krause) are nicely summarized and compared. This section continues by discussing the discovery method, delivering effective lectures, questioning techniques, writing-to-learn activities, and using technology effectively. In the latter topic, however, the material comes across as outdated with the lack of information on personal response systems (clickers), podcasts, and social networking tools, which have become more

mainstream since this book was first published in 2003. Part IV is another extremely useful section, covering strategies for teaching problem solving skills that have a sound basis in research. Included in this section are the case study method, problem-based learning, quantitative reasoning, and how to use science laboratories to develop higher thinking skills. The final section covers assessment and suggestions for measuring student progress and documenting course effectiveness.

Summary

Strengths

- aimed toward faculty instead of administrators
- applicable to all disciplines
- excellent overview of current theories in SoTL
- broad coverage of topics
- thorough bibliography to access literature for additional study and depth
- accessible language, jargon limited and clearly defined

Weakness

- outdated in *Technology* section since the book was published in 2003

Overall, this book is exactly what it promises – a resource for college instructors looking to improve their teaching effectiveness based on research. New faculty will find it particularly valuable, especially those who are unfamiliar with the teaching and learning literature, but anyone who wants to improve their teaching using effective methods grounded in research will find many ideas to consider and implement. All the major facets involved in teaching a course, from preparation to assessment, are covered with enough breadth, depth, and clarity to make this “toolbox” a worthwhile addition to your personal library.